

Chilean Feminism(s) in the nineties: Paradoxes of an unfinished transition

More than a decade after a plebiscite marked the end of military rule in Chile, feminists continue to have contradictory views regarding the arrival of democracy. As the first ten years of restored democratic government came to an end, the women who had contributed towards the re-emergence of feminism¹ and the reconstruction of a broad-based women's movement strongly disagree on the effects democracy has had on feminist ideals and proposals.

Many of these women believe that feminism has had an impact on Chilean society and contributed towards improving the condition of women. During this past decade women's integration into public life has increased while legal discrimination is slowly eliminated². As an array of socio-economic indicators demonstrates, women's integration to public life followed closely the country's socio-economic modernisation³. Moreover, the first democratically elected government after a seventeen year long dictatorship established an institution responsible for "women's affairs"; international and national agreements have been ratified, and offices and programs for women multiplied at all levels of public administration (municipalities, ministries, services), as well as in universities, trades unions and political parties.

In general terms, some demands posed by previously isolated feminist voices have gained increased social legitimacy. Nowadays, the media and other public forums have taken up concepts, discourses and issues that had previously been considered taboo or irrelevant for

¹The terms re-emergence or "second wave" feminism are used to distinguish the contemporary movement from the suffragist mobilisation during the first half of the twentieth century.

² In 1994 Congress approved the Intra-family Violence Law. After the transition several reforms to the Labour Code were introduced to eliminate discrimination and improve women's rights. The Civil Code was modified to eliminate the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children (depending on whether they had been born in or out of wedlock) and adultery was eliminated as a civil offence (it was previously considered a felony only when perpetrated by women).

³The economically active population among women increased from 31.8 per cent in 1990 to 36 per cent in 1998. The level of women's schooling surpassed that of men by one year (10.6 years in comparison to 9.6). The percentage

society. Formerly patrimony of a reduced group of activists and intellectuals, these concepts and discourses have spread to ever increasing number of women and sectors within Chilean society (Valenzuela 1998; Baldez 1999).

Despite these achievements, both critics and activists agree that the public presence of the women's movement⁴, including feminist organisations, has gradually disappeared as a political force⁵ in post-transition Chile. Paradoxically, feminists' voices have disappeared precisely as the discourses and demands they had struggled for were been incorporated in public agendas. In other words, as the modernising discourse on "equal opportunities for women" advances, the political agent that originally promoted it disappears. This is the paradox that confronts Chilean feminism in the nineties and one of the reasons that explains the distrust and discomforts many feminists exhibit towards this period of democratic rule.

Feminist activism and ideals have changed unquestionably conditioned by global processes both social and political in nature. Yet, others of national scope have probably had a key impact on these changes; they have modified the opportunities and restrictions that condition the development of civil society, including collective action, citizen participation and social movements. In other words, the transformation of feminist politics has at the same time coincided and been shaped by the change in political regime. In the case of Chile, this transition had a negative impact on the ability of social actors to mobilise politically and represent their interests in the public sphere (Garreton 1995; Mouliau 1997; Drake and Jaksic 1999). The newly installed

of women under the poverty line decreased in this decade from 39.2 per cent to 22 per cent. Maternal mortality rates were reduced to half, from 0.4 to 0.2 for every 1.000 live births.

⁴ A "social movement" refers to a specific type of collective action, a *multipolar system or field of action* (Melucci 1992). It is a fragile and heterogeneous social construction in which a great spectrum of methods forms of solidarity and organisations, as well as meanings and objectives are joined in a relatively stable manner.

⁵ It should be noted that this article focuses specifically on the feminist movement and not on a more general mobilisation of women. The feminist movement is understood as the group of actors, organisations and individuals that mobilise and/or adhere to a set of principles that recognise the existence of a system of gender domination and are committed with its transformation. For women vs. feminist movement in Chile see: Frohmann & Valdes 1993; Rios 1997; Rios et al 1998; Alvarez 1998; Vargas 1998; Baldez 1999.

regime has not only failed to strengthen the development of civil society, but its very existence has turned previous forms of organisation and mobilisation obsolete.

Despite the importance of structural factors for the development of social actors, the transformation of the feminist movement cannot be understood as a mere by-product of these structural processes. An analysis of its re-configuration must necessarily consider internal movement dynamics; its links with the political system; alliances with other civil society actors; as well as the capacity to react and adjust to new social and political conditions. It is precisely the interaction between these macro and micro levels, which characterises the specificity of feminist action and distinguishes it from similar experiences by other social actors.

This article addresses these issues in three separate sections. The first analyses some aspects of the political opportunity structure relevant for the development of civil society and social mobilisation. The second focuses on the changes in feminist activism and organisation in the 1990s. It looks in particular to the transformation of the feminist field through the expansion of its discourses, the diversification of its organisational structures and the changing relationship between feminism and socialism. The article concludes by highlighting the challenges posed by the reconfiguration of the feminist field for the advance of both feminist ideals and democracy in Chile.

I. Social actors in the midst of an unfinished transition

The Chilean transition to democracy has been extensively studied⁶. Diverging from similar processes in other countries of the region, this transition was neither the result of institutional breakdown nor an entirely concerted event, but clearly conditioned and controlled by the

⁶ See among others: Garreton 1995; Jocelyn-Holt 1998, Menéndez-Carrión & Joignant; Drake & Jaksic 1999; Moulian 1997.

mechanisms and norms set out by the dictatorship⁷. The change in political regime had long-lasting repercussions for the relationship between the State and the system of political representation and civil society (Garreton 1995). Paradoxically, as in other South American countries, the return to democratic rule, which eliminated repressive measures and opened the structure of political opportunities, had the short-term effect of reducing the opportunities for the development of civil society and previous forms of social mobilisation.

A. Relevant International trends

During the past few decades the world has increasingly become an interconnected arena, where events at one end impact and are known almost instantly in all other regions. In this context social actors, including feminists, have formed cross-national alliances and networks able to influence international institutions, exchanged knowledge and information and mobilised politically. Their efforts have in turn, reproduced and amplified dissident voices positioning alternative visions and information at the centre of international debates (Alvarez 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998).

The "international community", specifically the United Nations system, has stimulated the emergence of a new agenda of rights that includes "gender perspective" as one of its components. This new "gender friendly" approach has sparked two simultaneous processes. First, international agents exert pressure and provide incentives in favour of gender policies; and secondly, there is increase demand and resources for specialised knowledge and skills on gender issues. It is precisely feminist activists and academics that possess this knowledge and are urged to participate in this globalised process. Furthermore, in this same period, development agencies, which had traditionally supported Latin American feminist activism, have implemented drastic policy changes. Whereas in the past they had supported initiatives to strengthen civil society *Vis*

⁷ The regime abolished the country's Constitution and drew up a new legal body in 1980 that is still in place. This new legal body defined the terms and itinerary for the transition process.

à Vis the State, especially those focused on popular sectors, today they have reduced their funding and aim at improved social returns⁸.

These processes forced on the one hand, Latin American feminists to modify the practices they had originally designed to confront a hostile authoritarian context (Alvarez 1998) and on the other, favour the thematic specialisation and professionalisation of feminist activists and their organisations. Hence, the politics of confrontation have been transformed into the politics of negotiation requiring intricate knowledge of policy-making processes. This is not to say that they are void of conflict, nor that international spheres have cease to be contentious, but that the script for interaction has changed and in so doing, pushed those involved to change strategies to secure future influence.

B. Political culture

Political culture is a key dimension in a structure of political opportunities⁹. In Chile this culture has been traditionally both state and institutionally centred; citizens expected the State to assume political initiative and satisfy their demands¹⁰. Chilean political culture can be interpreted in Nancy Fraser's (1997) terms, as one that privileges the existence of a hegemonic public sphere, undermining the existence of "subordinate counter publics" that might serve to balance the power at the centre. This is particularly troublesome for subordinate groups, such as feminists, who have historically had greater difficulties in accessing institutional public spheres.

⁸ Some of the agencies that have reduced or cease their work in Chile are Oxfam (UK and Canada), HIVOS, NOVIB (both Dutch) and a number of other German and French institutions.

⁹ Political culture refers to a social construction that defines what is considered "political" in a certain society. It refers to frames of meanings and discourses that make intelligible legitimise and order the functioning of political systems (Alvarez, Dagnino & Escobar, 1998: Introduction).

¹⁰ A study conducted by the *Centro de Estudios de la Mujer* found that most of the social actors interviewed expected the government to promote their political participation and organisation. Women's groups favoured establishing links with the State and political parties rather than with other organisations within civil society (Guzman, Hola and Ríos, 1999).

The process of transition introduced new elements to this traditional political culture. Among the most relevant are the fear of conflict and the pathological search for consensus (Lechner & Guell, 1999) which, together have discouraged public debate and promoted a type of self-censorship among those sectors committed with democratisation.

In contrast to other countries in the region, conservative sectors have maintained considerable political power in post-transition Chile. This has translated into a renewed conservative hegemony or as many believe, a "modernisation without modernity" with the Catholic Church as one of its driving forces. Throughout this period the Church has managed not only to maintain but increase its political clout in most areas of political life; the debate around the still pending issue of divorce is illustrative of this trend. After several failed attempts a group of representatives finally succeeded in placing a proposal to reform current legislation on civil marriages in the legislative agenda¹¹. Bishop Errazuriz –archbishop of Santiago- publicly reprimanded the group, which included three Christian democrats who were finally forced to meet with Errazuriz and assure him they were only interested in promoting “the integrity of the family”¹². Moreover, continued Church opposition has proven more successful than initial signs on the part of president Lagos in support of this reform. More than two years after Lagos came to power the initiative still sits in Congress without receiving the executive’s support necessary to be included in the legislative agenda¹³.

¹¹ This proposal was presented to Congress on November 28, 1995. The House of Representatives and a special Senate commission have both voted in favour of the idea to legislate. Since the return of democracy two other initiatives had failed to pass to the second stage of legislative debate.

¹² This motion is far from ideal in terms of individual rights. It is perhaps its very conservative basis that has allowed its initial approval where other reforms had failed. In essence, it was designed to serve as a deterrent against divorce, therefore, if approved, a divorce will turn into a long, complex and expensive legal process while the current institution of annulments will be abolished (which has until now served as an escape hatch).

¹³ In 2001 there was a heated debate within the government coalition around this issue. Some (including the minister of SERNAM) came out in favour of including the “divorce proposal” in the legislative agenda; others (including the Christian Democratic Party) opposed the idea concerned over the effect such a divisive issue would have before the parliamentary elections scheduled for December. This position finally prevailed with no further discussion after the elections.

The current situation is a double edge sword. On the one hand, the power of conservative sectors increases especially that of the Catholic Church, while the space for political manoeuvre on contentious issues decreases. On the other, progressive sectors have failed to construct an anti-hegemonic block capable of legitimating values and world-visions able to counteract the symbolic power of the Church.

Hence, both the fear of conflict and the relative weakness of secular discourses have contributed towards silencing feminist voices. Either moved by political pragmatism or pushed by fear of authoritarian regression, some feminists seem to have accepted the imperatives of the “new democratic model”. According to Grau, Perez and Olea (1997), a sort of “discursive accommodation” has taken place within feminist circles, where discourses are accommodated to the requirements of the interlocutor, thus a self-imposed censorship prevails. This explains –in part- the difficulties encountered when attempting to articulate autonomous arguments in favour of some of feminism's most contested demands (Rios and Aravena 1997).

C. The party system

If there is a distinctive feature to Chilean political life this is undoubtedly the party system which emerged on the first half of the twentieth century. This system was deeply embedded in society and solidly established in cultural and institutional terms. Before the 1973 military coup, parties represented true micro-cultures around which collective and individual identities were built; they monopolised the representation of social interests and demands, mediating between social actors and the State and often interfering with the formers’ autonomy (Garreton 1993).

This relationship between parties and social actors begins to erode under the dictatorship, in part due to the regime's explicit policy to dismantle the party system and banish the left from political life. Political repression and the destruction of public spheres collaborated in diminishing parties’ control over social actors. Yet, despite a considerable loss of power and legitimacy, the party system proved strong enough to survive.

D. Public policies

State policies and discourses are crucial in generating the opportunities; resources and restrictions social actors must confront (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; Calderon 1995; Canel 1992; Tarres 1992; Melucci 1985, Tilly 1985). The form and effects this impact takes depend, among other factors, on the State's capacity and will to repress dissident groups, institutional norms and procedures that regulate the emergence of social organisations, specific policies aimed at civil society, symbolic referents and discourses constructed by public institutions, the legitimacy of non-institutional actors to represent their interests, as well as strategies for inclusion or exclusion of certain issues and actors from public debates. In sum, the question is not whether the state intervenes directly on the organisation of civil society, but what role it plays in establishing the rules that condition political life.

Civil society in post-transition Chile is thus confronted with a new political structure of resources, opportunities and restrictions. For most analysts this structure has had a negative effect on the development of civil society and hindered the survival of non-governmental and social organisations (De la Maza 1999; Moulian 1997; Guillaudat and Mouterde 1998).

In this regard, the *Concertacion* governments have shown little programmatic coherence in fostering a relevant role for civil society in the newly established democratic system. Their policies have been particularly deficient in restoring the social fabric, promoting the development of social and non-governmental organisations, and in fostering greater citizen participation. Coupled with conflicting visions within the ruling coalition this deficiency has led toward fragmentary and contradictory measures, insufficient in some cases and outright adverse in others.

The inauguration of a public institution responsible for women's issues during the first democratic government had a lasting effect on the way in which the women's movement and feminists in

particular, would relate to the state. President Aylwin's government, responding to a demand posed by the *Concertación* of Women for Democracy, created the National Woman's Service (SERNAM) "to promote the participation of women in national life and equality of opportunities between the sexes" (SERNAM 1994).

Yet, SERNAM's mission was a source of political conflict since its inception. Right-wing parties, which saw the institution as a concession to feminist demands, attempted to limit its power to a mere co-ordinating role and away from direct interaction with women's organisations (Valenzuela 1998). Despite the public commitment with the creation of the institution the coalition parties gave little real support to SERNAM. This due to the misgivings which important sectors within the coalition –Christian Democrats among the most salient- shared with the opposition respects the feminist connotations of most demands.

Furthermore, SERNAM itself has been erratic towards women's and non-governmental organisations. A study conducted by the *Centro de Estudios de la Mujer* concludes:

SERNAM's strategy has sought to establish links with those actors who might transfer power back to it, especially different types of expertise in the gender domain... There are only marginal efforts aimed at fostering the organisation and political participation of women situated in other spheres and to generate formalised channels of communication with civil society (1999: 133).

Other studies found that state institutions, SERNAM in particular, are eager to relate to NGOs and women's organisations as technical experts able to support public policy-making but seldom recognise them in their capacity as citizens "representatives" of civil society (Alvarez 1997, 1998; Valenzuela 1998; Guzman, Hola and Rios 1999). By recognising these actors only as professional experts, the State has undermined their political importance and their traditional hybrid identity as part of a social movement (Alvarez 1998b).

In light of this disappointing record, the election of Ricardo Lagos on December of 2000 provoked high expectations among many feminists. He was to be the first socialist president since the overthrow of Salvador Allende in 1973, a man who had explicitly acknowledged his commitment to secularism and social equality. Once in power he named Adriana Del Piano as SERNAM's minister, coincidentally with the internal shifts within the governing coalition, Lagos decided leave the Woman's Service under the direction of the progressive wing of the *Concertacion* and in so doing brake with Christian Democrats' decade-long control over the institution. As a PPD militant, Del Piano had occupied several government posts in the last decade and had a history of political involvement, yet she had neither participated in the women's movement nor identified herself as a feminist (El Mercurio, 2000). Early on after her appointment it became evident that the minister wanted to move away from many of the policies and discourses that SERNAM had been supporting since its inception. Six months after assuming her post, Del Piano participated in the UN Beijing +5 conference where she not only stayed clear of any commitments towards improving the country's track on reproductive rights but explicitly said her government would pursue a "pro-life" policy¹⁴. Moreover, she declared her hesitation against the concept of gender which she saw as too "complex and vague" for people to understand and propose that it was time for SERNAM to stop talking about discrimination and start focusing in more positive aspects of women's contribution to society.

In sum, the new administration has proven to be yet another disappointment. The Lagos's government has placed its priorities regarding women's issues on those areas that can be readily shown as concrete results for "urgent problems", at the same time that there has been an explicit decision to stay away from contentious issues that may cause internal conflict within the coalition. Issues, coincidentally considered either too radical or feminist, or both. The end result is

¹⁴ Unpublished speech read by the Minister and distributed among the Chilean NGO delegates and other participants.

little if any progress on more central issues of rights such as divorce, affirmative action or abortion¹⁵.

II. Feminism in the nineties: from the “glorious history” to the present.

Undoubtedly, discomfort and malaise have permeated feminist voices throughout the nineties. As the transition unfolds many activists search for answers, perplexed by a new scenario that blurs the meaning of their previous political militancy and ideals. What became of those twenty thousand women that on International Women’s Day filled the Santa Laura Stadium in 1989 to celebrate the return of democracy?¹⁶ They appear absent from public life in post-transition Chile. Only in 1998, and due in part to the former dictator's imminent appointment as lifetime senator, feminists and other women’s organisations became visible in the streets again. Close to five thousand women marched on March 8th under the slogan "*Democracy is in Debt with Women*", to protest against what they perceived to be a symbol of the precariousness of the new regime. Notwithstanding this interlude, the following years have again witnessed the invisibility of feminists as a political actor. After 1998 there have been no other attempts to connect feminist mobilisation to other national political issues; even the unfolding conflict over Pinochet’s legal prosecution ceased to play a mobilising role among women’s groups¹⁷.

1. Second Wave Feminism

¹⁵ The only notable exception is the proposal to reform the law on domestic violence (Intro Familial Violence Law 19.250). Yet the specific content of the changes remain unclear as the executive’s ability to secure the opposition’s support in Congress to approved them.

¹⁶ That year a broad-based coalition of women's organisations organised the March 8th celebration under the slogan “Democracy goes because women are present” (“*La Democracia va porque la Mujer esta*”).

¹⁷ In both 1999 and 2000 there were at least 4 or 5 different events on March 8th, none of them gathered more than a hundred women. The same was repeated in 2001 when a group of organisations (NGOs, mostly those in Grupo Iniciativa, advocacy networks and gender studies programs) organized a “civic day for women”: a street fair where information on women’s rights and services was provided. The initiative was criticised by some groups because it was organised in front of the government palace and followed exactly the same format as other activities that the Lagos government had organised.

Feminism re-emerged in Chile after a long period of “feminist silence” (Kirkwood 1986) following the suffragist mobilisation. Patricia Chuchryk dates the first public appearance by second wave feminists on August 11, 1983, during the darkest years of military repression. A group of sixty women met in front of the National Library and extended a banner that read: "*Democracy Now! Feminist Movement of Chile*". It was at this time when many women began to organise politically and a broad-based movement began to come together as three distinct spheres of activism converged: human rights organisations, popular women's groups (*talleres de mujeres pobladoras*), and feminist organisations.

Second wave feminism emerged as a reaction against the authoritarianism present throughout Chilean society: from the brutal authoritarianism imposed by the military regime, to that in everyday life (Chuchryk 1984). As in the rest of Latin America, this feminist project owed much of its identity to a socialist ideology. This connection became central for Chilean feminism which contrary to the experience in some industrialised countries, linked theoretically and politically the transformation of gender subordination with that of capitalism. As a result the left, especially its parties, became feminism's omnipresent *interlocutor*.

Feminists saw their political activism as a struggle for democracy and against military rule. The political strategies and internal conflicts that characterised the movement were conditioned by national politics and its commitment to democracy served as a unifying force between feminists and other sectors of the women's movement. Notwithstanding their condition as a minority within this movement, feminists provided discursive sustenance and identity for women's larger mobilisation. The slogan "*Democracy in the country and in the home*" coined by feminists and adopted by the women's movement attests to this leadership. However, this did not translate into widespread or unconditional support for feminist ideals, on the contrary, the fragility of this support made for unstable political alliances around gender issues (Rios 1994).

2. Feminism(s) in the nineties

Once the transition began, the weakness of a shared political agenda nourished those cleavages that had historically strained the movement which were now furthered strengthened by the resurgence of party control over the political process. Political parties, once again subordinated social actors to a secondary role, yet this time they also pushed them into a dichotomised political struggle (Garreton, 1993).

Since most research on the transition focused on the conflictive relationship between party militants and feminists, or between these and popular women (*pobladoras*), the scope and content of conflicts within the feminist field have been overlooked. Hence, there is little consensus regarding the content of ideological confrontations and the manner in which the feminist's movement began to lose its previous "cohesion". What is clear is that electoral politics and partisan conflicts had a profound effect on feminist discourses, activism and its subsequent fragmentation. This confirms a fundamental characteristic of Chilean feminism: its permanent and obstinate relationship with party politics.

With the return of democracy "second wave" activism came to a close, opening the way for new forms of political mobilisation and organisation. In recent years, some academics have tended to overemphasise and idealise the internal cohesion the movement once had. History has been rewritten from the perspective of a specific sector of the movement overshadowing the conflicts and trajectories of those considered deviant from this more "institutional" sector. Mainstream feminist discourse proposes that the women's movement created the *Concertación* of Women for Democracy to present their demands to the new democratic government. Feminists then returned to political parties and the State, while others remained in NGOs. It also emphasises feminist affinity with the newly elected governing coalition.

A study being conducted at CEM (Godoy et. al 2001) has found that this “official story” has become a very powerful collective discourse among feminists. The overwhelming majority of the feminist interviewed (ninety in total in three of the country’s largest cities: Santiago, Concepcion and Valparaiso) reproduced a similar sequence of events when asked about the path followed by the feminist movement during the transition. Notwithstanding this consensus, the study found significant discrepancies between the dominant discourse and the political trajectories of many women interviewed who neither agreed nor were invited to participate in the *Concertación* of Women for Democracy. They were either linked to political parties of the left that had not joined the *Concertacion*¹⁸ or had never been party militants in the first place. Moreover, only a small minority of those linked to the Concertacion was appointed to government positions, while a few others were employed by the state much later and has never occupied leadership posts. My central argument is that the dominant discourse regarding feminists’ role in the transition should be modified to account for the multiplicity of paths followed and the different trajectories and strategies chosen that have in turn, shaped the present field of action, including conflicting political projects and a contested reconstruction of a shared history.

In the last two decades traditional forms of organisation and mobilisation have decline or disappear while new ones emerge. Today, it is more accurate to speak of a field of action rather than a traditional social movement; As Alvarez (1998b: 3) states, this is an "expansive, polycentric and heterogeneous [field], which extends beyond the organisations or groups characteristic of a movement". The sites where women, who declare themselves feminists, act have multiplied, "it is no longer only in the streets, autonomous or consciousness-raising groups and workshops for popular education. Although feminists continue to participate in those spheres today, they are also present in a wide range of other cultural, social and political arenas.

¹⁸ Of the women interviewed 12 per cent said they had been a member of the Chilean Communist Party and 15,7 per cent of the MIR (some of these women continue to participate in these parties) (Godoy, Guerrero & Rios 2001).

Yet, most agree that the movement has lost the cohesion and visibility it acquired in the previous period¹⁹.

A. Dissemination of feminist discourses

Feminists today must confront an increasing expansion and diversification of issues and spheres of action. Their demands, discourses and ideals, previously confined to the opposition movement, have increasingly permeated public agendas; they are taken up by women from diverse sectors of society, covered by the mass media, discussed in academic circles and regularly appear in political debates. The variety of sites where these discourses circulate has also increased. Whereas in past decades feminist's activism was reduced to a few urban centres such as Santiago, Valparaíso, Concepción, in the first half of the nineties groups emerged in different regions of the country²⁰. In this sense, there is no longer a single geographical and thematic centre, but a multiplicity of micro-centres at local, regional and national levels. This expansion thus poses new challenges for maintaining cohesion within the movement as well as for the circulation of knowledge and information.

In the same line, academic production, political activism and networking are increasingly build around specific issues rather than on a general project for social change. The most significant issues for mobilisation have been domestic violence, reproductive and sexual rights the feminisation of poverty and women's rights. Furthermore, an array of specific political identities have also become salient for those women who identify with a common sexual orientation, ethnicity, class or generation but have

¹⁹This is repeatedly pointed out in the publication of a seminar held in Santiago at the beginning of 1998. In this publication Sonia Alvarez, Raquel Olea, María Elena Valenzuela, Susana Cubillos, Marcela Ríos and Elizabeth Guerrero, among other participants, corroborate the absence of a feminist political referent (Ríos 1998). Also see the publication of the Seminar "Barreras y potencialidades del movimiento de mujeres en Chile" (MEMCH 1998). And the special issue of *Fempres* dedicated to feminist politics at the end of the century, *Feminismos de Fin de Siglo* (Fempres 1999).

²⁰ Groups such as Red de Mujeres in Valdivia and Colectivo Mujeres in La Serena as well as gender studies programs in universities in Iquique, Antofagasta, La Serena, Concepcion, Valdivia and Santiago.

difficulty establishing ties with other feminists. In practice, these trends have questioned the very notion of a unified feminist subject and, with that, the possibility of concerted political action.

Feminists are thus confronted with a two-fold process: an increasing diversity of interests, identities and projects and, the weakening of a common project capable of articulating and mobilising them. Once again this poses a complex, and to a certain degree, contradictory scenario. While the growing plurality and heterogeneity sets the stage for greater participation of women who traditionally had not mobilised around a gender identity, it also causes fragmentation and lack of articulation among feminists. Each group or network mobilises around its specific objectives, organises its own activities, elaborates discourses, strategies, and proposals, without them being necessarily complemented, informed nor co-ordinated with that of other organisations.

Often times, there is a weak and conflicting dialogue between different sectors and little capacity to mobilise and act on issues of interest to all. The increase difficulty in articulating shared public strategies has become evident in the commemoration of key feminist milestones as International Women's Day or September 28 (Latin American day for the de-penalisation of abortion). In each case there is a multiplicity of unconnected activities of similar nature, each of which has little mobilising strength.

B. Politico – Ideological transformation

The initial connection between feminism and socialism has gradually disappeared in past decades in part due to feminism' distancing from its Marxist origins; the left's ideological transformation and cultural and political changes brought about by the breakdown of state socialism. As a result it is no longer possible to speak of a singular feminist ideological project. It becomes necessary to speak of feminisms in the plural, with a multiplicity of ideological positions from liberal to radical, through a wide range of intermediate currents.

Feminists are now confront with a democratic system, fundamentally different from that of a military dictatorship that offered neither spaces nor incentives for dialogue or participation and used repression as a political weapon. Faced with a "common enemy" feminists were forced to maintain cohesion yet once it was gone an anti-establishment stance has ceased to serve as the basis for unity. Despite many feminists' manifest dissatisfaction with the type of "democracy" achieved, they no longer share a common vision regarding the government or the economic model. While some have actively participated in the *Concertación* governments, others continue to criticise and oppose their policies. While the formers argue that democratic governments have adopted (at least in part) the demands made by the women's movement, the latter denounce a betrayal of those demands. If the formers are closer to both political power structures and public debates, the latter have become marginalised from mainstream political life.

C. Organisational forms: continuity and change

The movement's organisational structures have also experienced significant change throughout this period. Informal organisations, groups and workshops, under which feminists had come together in the past, have given way to a growing diversification of collective arrangements. These changes have in turn influenced objectives, membership, political strategies and articulation with other social actors.

A case in point are the trends towards professionalisation and institutionalisation. Many groups that arose under military rule showed early signs of institutionalisation, they formalised internal procedures and focused on issues that would allow them for increased social impact and to safeguard their survival in a context of rapid social and economic transformation. Groups created as informal collectives for reflection and political mobilisation became non-governmental organisations as a required step towards consolidation. Sonia Alvarez (1997: 153) has referred to this process as the "*ngoization*" of the feminist field, present throughout Latin America but particularly ubiquitous in the case of Chile.

Non-governmental organisations represent one of the most prevalent organisational forms in the feminist field today even though they are neither one-dimensional nor a homogeneous group. On the contrary, they are characterised by great diversity of institutional arrangements, operating mechanisms, political strategies and membership composition²¹. Despite this diversity NGOs have come to play a central role in feminist politics in post-transition Chile. The study conducted by CEM found that a stunning 38,4 percent of feminist interviewed were employed in this type of organisations. It also suggests that this proportion was much higher in the first half of the decade before the change in founding policies on the part of development agencies provoked the current crisis in non-governmental spheres.

Issue-oriented *advocacy networks* are another important organisational form within the feminist field. Throughout the nineties several such networks were created, among the most important in terms of membership and activism are: The Chilean Network against Domestic and Sexual Violence, Information Network on the Rights of Women (RIDEM), Latin American Network of Women's Health, Women's Alternative Communication Network in Latin America (FEMPRESS), Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Network against Domestic and Sexual Violence and Women's Network of Popular Education (REPEM). There are also networks of women's social organisations such as the Network of Women's Social Organisations (REMOS), and the Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (ANAMURI). These networks are committed to advocacy and lobby strategies, especially those directed at governments and intergovernmental organisations. They co-ordinate the efforts of individuals and collectives across different regions of the country, while some explicitly promote the mobilisation of grass-roots organisations.

If there is an organisational form distinctively linked to the democratisation process, they are academic gender studies programs. In 1991 a group of humanities scholars established the first

such program in the country, *Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer*, at the University of Concepcion. Its emergence and that of other such programs should be understood as part of the growing legitimacy gained by *gender* as a public and academic concept and as the expression of political and cultural openness fostered by the transition to democracy. This openness allowed universities to revise their structures to incorporate debates, discourses and knowledge that had been marginalised during the dictatorship.

By the end of the nineties there were at least fourteen gender studies programs in thirteen universities across the country²². Most of these programs are located within social science or humanities faculties, combining teaching and research activities. They differ amongst each other by the magnitude of resources at their disposal (both material and human) as well as with respect to their legitimacy and stability within their respective institutions. They also differ from other feminist organisations in a variety of ways, including their membership. Exclusively professionals, who in general, and in contrast to members of non-governmental organisations, do not necessarily have a history of traditional movement activism, staff the majority of these programs.

Moreover, with some exceptions –including Concepcion’s PIEM– most of these programs do not identify publicly or explicitly as feminist institutions or as part of a larger feminist movement²³. Some of the women involved suggest that the absence of a feminist identity is a strategy to legitimise gender studies within very conservative academic establishments. They argue that

²¹There has been little empirical research on this issue. However, and according to the 1999 institutional directory (*Guía Silver*), there are twenty-four NGOs dedicated exclusively to women's issues in the country, and sixteen programs within larger NGOs. For further discussion on women's NGOs see Barrig 1997.

²²There are regional programs at the Universities of Concepción, La Serena y Valdivia, Arturo Prat in Iquique, José Santos Ossa in Antofagasta, Playa Ancha in Valparaíso and De la Frontera in Temuco, and in Santiago at the Social Science and Humanities Faculties at the University of Chile, at the History Institute of the Catholic University; at the Institute for Advance Studies in the University of Santiago; as well as in Academia de Humanismo Cristiano, Universidad Bolivariana and Cardenal Silva Henríquez (ex Blas Cañas).

²³This is evident both in their declared institutional missions and objectives and through their discourse. Interviews with the directors of the programs at: Universidad de Concepcion, Facultad de Humanidades Universidad de Chile, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales Universidad de Chile, Universidad de Santiago, Universidad de La Serena (conducted as part of the study in progress at CEM 2001).

acknowledging ties to feminist principles would be detrimental for their claims to academic “rigor and objectivity”. However, their internal membership and the political trajectories they have pursued might also be an element influencing this selection of strategies.

The debate between “gender” and “feminism” has caused friction amongst academics and between them and other feminists who see themselves more directly link to a political movement and therefore question the academics’ commitment to feminism. More importantly, this sharp division between political feminism and academic production also blurs the connection for society at large. In other words, despite the increasing strength and recognition that some gender scholars have gained, there is little public awareness regarding the historical link between feminist struggles and the emergence of gender studies.

Other, more traditional organisational structures are also present in post-transition feminist politics. These are a less structured type of organisation, with few formalised procedures and different levels of cohesiveness and stability, yet by and large, with an explicit feminist identity. The majority of these groups are linked to a feminist current that emerged in the early nineties: *feminismo autonomo*²⁴. There are also other informally organised groups that do not necessarily adhere to a specific ideological current²⁵ many of which were established by women from different social and generational backgrounds from that of “historical” militants.

Despite the existence of such organisations, the general trend throughout the nineties has been marked by the difficulty in maintaining this type of organisation structure. As we will see, at the beginning of the decade an attempt was made to strengthen these organisations by creating spheres where feminist could come together and build common political platforms. However, early on it became clear that a breach had emerged between feminists who participated in more

²⁴The organising Commission of the VII Encuentro Feminista Latinoamericano y del Caribe was composed by some of these organisations. A few of the groups that remain active are the Collectives Clorindas y Agridulce, Autonomous Feminist Movement (MFA) and Movement for Autonomy among others.

movement type spheres and those active in political advocacy and academic work connected to political parties, the State, networks or gender studies programs.

The national *Encuentros*²⁶ organised at the beginning of the decade were the first major site for this divide to be played out as a conflict with both political and ideological overtones. While some believe the only route was to build an “autonomous” movement away from the “structures of patriarchal power”²⁷ others proposed a more moderate strategy that would seek changes within current political structures. As a result, and in contrast to other historical periods, the nineties were characterised by the relative weakness of sites for non-institutional political activism or social organisations based on their members’ voluntary participation. In sum, there was a lack of militancy understood in its more conventional sense and an increase in more “technical” intervention in the construction of public agendas at all institutional levels.

Lastly, a significant number of feminists have opted for individual activism away from strictly movement-type sites. They conduct their “militancy” in different cultural sites, such as radio stations, magazines, alternative bookstores among others, as well as through an array of artistic expressions including literature, dance, theatre and music. According to Collin (1999), this cultural production represents the only way to strengthen feminism in our era, “a New World can not be initiated without new words, without new forms”. These self-proclaimed independent feminists also attest to the diversity of individual trajectories and political strategies present throughout this period.

D. Restructuring the feminist field

²⁵Such is the case of Feminist Collectives Bajo Sospecha in Santiago, Kaleidas in Valparaíso, Enredadas in Valdivia, Al Borde in Concepción among others.

²⁶ Literally Encounters.

²⁷ Margarita Pissano (1996). She is one of the central figures and ideologue of the current that advocates the autonomous strategy.

The growing professionalisation and specialisation of feminist organisations has also contributed towards the movement's transformation. These trends have been fostered by new challenges posed by the democratisation process and specific state policies, international transformations as well as by a change in funding priorities on the part of development agencies. These international factors have dramatically curved feminist political activism during the last decade by stimulating the production of “gender” knowledge and expertise necessary to legitimise feminist demands and accommodate their discourses and proposals to the complex reality of a rapidly modernising society.

However, these processes have had contradictory effects on the feminist field. The trend towards professionalisation has meant in practice that a majority of organisations are led and staffed by professional activists leaving few opportunities for either newcomers or non-professional volunteers. As these organisations institutionalise, they turn away from traditional recruiting mechanisms that had previously allowed to include women from different social and generational origins from those of “second wave” activists. The restricted nature of communication networks and information flows built around relatively elitist academic and professional circles reinforce these trends.

While these processes unfold, an important segment of the movement has followed a rather coherent strategy since the beginning of the transition (mostly formal institutions such as NGOs, advocacy networks, gender studies programs and organised party militants). Their aim has been to influence political and institutional agendas. More specifically, they attempted to incorporate some of the movement's demands into the *Concertacion* government's programs, participate in the public-policy making and international debates as well as to establish alliances with women cross-regionally and globally. The reverse side of this strategy is the relative abandonment of consciousness-raising and more traditional political mobilisation, both characteristic of the previous period.

For their part, other feminists, especially those excluded from the transitional pact, have not shown the same level of coherence in the selection of political strategies. In general, they have not generated alternative anti-hegemonic projects in tune with the new democratic context. The diversity of trajectories, experiences and political stances are such, that it is difficult to identify a single homogeneous path, equivalent to that followed by the “institutional” sector. However, in spite of this heterogeneity, there are some recognisable trends.

Self-proclaimed “autonomous feminists” have advanced the most coherent alternative project. This group has opted to remain on the margins of the political system proposing to construct “autonomous” sites for feminist activism and strengthen the movement as a social actor away from institutional power of any sort. In practice they oppose any form of contact with political parties, state and intergovernmental institutions, co-operation agencies and even NGOs, which they do not recognise as part of the movement. Unfortunately, its extreme dogmatism and rigidity have weakened this strategy and blocked the possibility to construct alliances and triggered multiple internal conflicts among *autonomas*’ organisations themselves.

The *autonomas* main success has been of a symbolic nature; they were able to transform discourses and debates within Chilean and Latin American feminist fields forcing, at the same time, a long postponed discussion about feminist political practices. They also manage to articulate a common discourse that cuts across national frontiers²⁸. The *autonomas* moment of greatest political salience came with the organisation of the Latin American and Caribbean VII Feminist Encounter held in Cartagena, Chile on 1996. Through the organisation of the regional gathering this current took control of one of the most important venues for feminist political activism and succeeded in monopolising most movement-type events for the better part of the decade.

²⁸This sector organised three national meetings and five forums between 1991 and 1997 as well as the first (and, thus far, only) self-proclaimed Autonomous Feminist Encuentro in 1998 at Sorata, Bolivia.

Besides these central strategies many feminists have followed a wide range of political routes. Their efforts have maintained traits of more traditional political activism identified with previous feminist politics: grass-roots organisation and consciousness raising. They have sought alliances with the state and other civil society groups around issues such as domestic violence, reproductive rights and labour participation. These feminists, a majority within the movement field according to some, have kept a relative distance from the ideological dispute between “*autonomas* and *institucionales*”. Even though, most of these feminists disagree with the *autonomas*’ political tactics and stigmatisation of institutional spheres, they often share their arguments and criticisms of the advocacy strategy.

E. Phases of mobilisation in the nineties

The complexities of the transformations confronting feminist activists and the contentious nature of internal movement dynamics have influenced feminism in often-contradictory directions. Moreover, the diverse but connected processes we have discussed have unfolded at different paces. We must thus interpret feminist politics in the nineties not as a single coherent process, a homogeneous sequence of events but composed of different phases of activism. Guerrero and Godoy (2001) argue that the nineties may be divided into three main phases: the first from 1990 to 1993, the second from 1994 until 1996 and the third from 1997 to the present.

The initial phase was characterised by the organisation of national gatherings (*Encuentros* and *Foros Nacionales*)²⁹ aim at generating autonomous political spheres, meeting places for feminist that could foster a common collective identity. The second phase arises as the initial search for unity fails and feminists begin to pursue differentiated political strategies. In the midst of “escalating differences” two events would have far-reaching consequences for feminist politics: the IV UN Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 and the VII Latin American *Encuentro* held on 1996. These events were organised by and for a different set of constituents who

²⁹The *Encuentros* were held in Valparaiso in 1991, Concepcion in 1993 and Santiago in 1995. *Foros* were held in different cities in 1993, 1993, 1994, 1994, 1996 and 1997.

increasingly saw their paths as divergent and in contradiction to each other. Those feminist connected to the state, political parties and NGOs, most closely associated with a strategy of advocacy began to organise around the UN Conference, while others mostly linked with *autonomas* current tended to gather around the organisation of the VII *Encuentro*³⁰.

Finally, the most contentious period was left behind and a third phase interpreted as “a new feminist silence” began in 1997 (Godoy & Guerrero, 2001). During this last phase feminist activism decreased notoriously: few events were organised, public mobilisation was rare, many organisations disappeared and a widespread pessimism settled within feminist circles regarding the prospects for renewed activism. Or in other words, and as Maruja Barrig (1997: 12) has eloquently argued: "the movement (women / feminist) does not move much, renews itself little, and congregates in the streets even less".

III. Some Final Remarks

This article has sought to understand the paradox confronting Chilean feminism after the transition to democracy: while feminist discourses and demands received increasing public attention and gender perspective is slowly accepted within institutional agendas, feminism has weakened both as a social actor and a political force. In other words, feminists have slowly lost their capacity to intervene in public life with an autonomous political platform and hence, to maintain visibility with respect to the rest of society. Throughout this discussion we have argued that this paradox must be understood resulting from the interplay between the structure of political opportunities and internal movement dynamics.

The structure of political opportunities that emerges after the transition to democracy has resulted in unfavourable conditions for the development of civil society. Among the key features

³⁰ For details on the unfolding debate regarding the VI *Encuentro* see the issue of May 1996 of *Cotidiano Mujer* (a feminist magazine based in Montevideo).

influencing the transformation of feminist politics are the re-emergence of the party system and the consequent realignment of state-society relations, government policies, the dominant political culture as well as relevant international trends.

The lack of clear policies regarding civil society and decreasing incentives for social organisation and citizen participation has encouraged feminist demobilisation. The recognition only of a specific sector of feminists as a valid political interlocutor on the part of democratically elected governments, has intensified internal conflicts and excluded other feminists from public debates, silencing their views and overshadowing their positions for the rest of society. Moreover, the increasing legitimacy of discourses of rights and equal opportunities coupled with the *Concertación* governments' modernising project have privileged the interaction with civil society as technical and professional experts rather than as citizens and political actors. The combination of these trends has on the one hand contributed towards the invisibility of feminists as a political force and, on the other, made possible the inclusion of some of their demands into public agendas. SERNAM's last minister attempts to distance herself from the concept of "gender" has in this sense, serve only to deepen the breach between feminist ideals and the Chilean State's brand of equal opportunity policies.

These trends have both encouraged and converged with internal movement transformations: widening of discursive and thematic boundaries, professionalisation, specialisation and institutionalisation, lack of internal channels for communication and articulation between feminist organisations, as well as changes in the type of political strategies followed.

Even though the feminist field was never a unified or homogeneous social force, individuals and organisations within the field had achieved a significant degree of articulation around common objectives: to regain democracy and contribute towards the definition of its future contents. Once the fundamental basis for unity disappeared, breakdown became imminent. A brake in the ideological ethos that had characterised Chilean feminism until then furthermore accentuated this

trend: its identification with socialism. Hence, the emergence of a multiplicity of ideological positions, none of which has the strength to articulate and mobilise a majority of feminists.

On the other hand, political strategies and organisational dynamics have been transformed in such a manner as to distance feminist politics from the activism typical of previous decades. Today, many feminist groups operate more like “interest groups” than traditional social movement organisations. This is particularly so in the case of the most prevalent organisational forms during this period: NGOs, gender studies programs and advocacy networks. These organisations can meet the technical requirements imposed by the State and therefore participate at the policy level, but have failed to promote the participation of women from wider sectors of society and generate stable links with different social and political actors. In sum, these groups have shown both unwillingness and inability to promote and articulate autonomous political mobilisation from civil society.

Moreover, organisational transformations, including institutionalisation, have inhibited the participation of women from different social and cultural backgrounds in feminist organisations. Today, information, knowledge and alliances among feminists remain reserved for a group of “initiated militants”. This movement field is fed and reproduced by those women who, in one way or another, participated in the emergence of second wave feminism in past decades. Consequently, the inclusion of new generations and women from different origins and experiences has remained problematic. It would seem that this difficulty in the reproduction of the movement is due to “the impossibility to communicate experiences from one generation to another” (Bellesi 1999) and to translate diversity and pluralism into power sharing. The present challenge is then to open spaces for new generations, but also for women who are beginning the search for political expressions with which to identify (Guerrero & Ríos 1998).

While an important sector of feminists has tried to adapt their strategies and proposals to new national and international contexts, more classical strategies of political mobilisation have been

abandoned. This has resulted in “a prioritisation of certain aspects of political citizenship, neglecting the most ‘disputed’ contents, diluting demands for democratisation, avoiding strategies for cultural and political transformation and civil society sites for contestation” (Vargas1998). Hence, the decline of an autonomous agenda, and the deterioration of a social base rooted in civil society, capable of sustaining and strengthening feminism and its ability to struggle against an elusive patriarchal order.

Last but not least, the debate of autonomy versus institutionalization has become yet another contribution to historical cleavages and represents ultimately, a struggle between sectors excluded and those included by the political system. The impossibility of dealing with these differences in a constructive manner, as expressions of feminist diversity and plurality and not as insurmountable fractures explains, to a great extent, the inability of feminism to become a significant political force in post-transition Chile.

The re-configuration of the feminist field poses theoretical and political challenges for all those interested in fostering democratisation and strengthening civil society *vis-à-vis* the State. Even if we recognise the impossibility of reconstructing past strategies and scenarios, and reject a nostalgic vision of an idealised past, is it possible to expect the emergence of social actors with the necessary political force to push for political democratisation from civil society? Considering, the heterogeneity within the feminist field, the multiplicity of organisational expressions, discourses, identities and its increasing fragmentation, is it possible to expect political responses to those conservative forces seeking to reverse present gains in the situation of women in our countries? And lastly, can feminist push for reforms without jeopardising their political independence as well as their subversive potential?

Current political strategies and dynamics within the feminist field call our attention to these and other questions. Undoubtedly, the manner in which feminists themselves confront these

challenges is fundamental for the future of feminism as a political force and its capacity to influence social and political transformations in course.

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